

# BROWN MEN
# and
# RED SAND

CHARLES P. MOUNTFORD



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# BROWN MEN AND RED SAND

WANDERINGS THROUGH WILD AUSTRALIA

*by*

*Charles P. Mountford*
F.R.A.I., F.R.G.S.

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CHAPTER 1

# *The Departure*

The great moment had arrived! For years I had hoped and planned to live among the aborigines of the western deserts of Central Australia so that I could study their art, their legends and their social customs, and now, after weeks of preparation we were off.

We journeyed north from Adelaide to Port Pirie, then to Port Augusta, where we wandered aimlessly round the town for three hours while mail, luggage and supplies were moved by hand to the narrow-gauge train that was to take us to Central Australia.

It was on the second day that we saw the aborigines, in little groups watching the white folk or minding the horses of the station-owners. The natives work on the outlying stations as musterers, drovers or shearers, for it is in the handling of animals that the aborigines are most expert.

It was midnight when we reached Oodnadatta, the end of our railway journey. The train, as usual, was late, but only two hours. Still, what are two hours in that country? The bushmen have adopted the philosophy of the Chinese: 'Every day brings us nearer to the grave, so why hurry there?'

We left Oodnadatta for the 280-miles journey at three o'clock. My wife, Lauri and I travelled in the front vehicle with the expedition gear; another lorry followed with the mails and supplies for the stations along the route.

We drove on hour after hour. After nightfall the whole world was confined to the rough track lit by the headlamps. The truck heaved, bumped and swayed from side to side. The driver, Charley McLeod, used his feet and hands continuously as he eased his vehicle

over the rough boulders, across sandy creek beds, and steered between the gaunt desert trees that stood out brightly for the moment, then passed into the inky blackness.

At last we had arrived at Ernabella Mission Station, bitterly cold, and aching in every limb. We had been travelling for almost thirty hours over the roughest of roads and were pleased indeed to climb out of the lorry, knowing that one stage of our journey was over.

The whole Mission staff came out to welcome us. After that we went to a nearby flat, unloaded our supplies and camping gear in the darkness, and made ready for a meal.

While we stood round the fire, trying to warm our frozen bodies and waiting for the billy to boil, we discussed the plans of the expedition.

'Got Tjundaga's camel string, eh?' said Alex. McLeod. 'They're a poor lot, you know. They're either old crocks or very young colts, and you can't push a string like that.'

Then the generosity of these true bushmen was revealed. 'If you get into trouble out there,' said Alex, pointing westward in the darkness, 'send me word. Don't trouble about whether you can pay. Just let me know and I'll be out as soon as I possibly can.'

CHAPTER 2

# *Our First Camp*

We woke to see the rocky spinifex-covered hills of the Musgrave Ranges. The flat on which we had camped was dotted with red granite outcrops, intersected by creeks lined with green-foliaged eucalypts, and carpeted with a thick growth of silver grass.

Round us was a scene of absolute confusion. There were boxes of supplies, bags of flour, scientific gear, and odds and ends everywhere, for it had been pitch dark and freezing cold when we had unloaded. To make things worse, we had dumped our gear in a patch of bindy-eye—a highly improved form of the prickly-jack. We found those thorns for days afterwards, in our bedclothes, in the bags, in the boxes, and in all sorts of unexpected places.

Lauri and I were faced with the arduous task of carrying all the goods to our permanent camp, a distance of about three hundred yards. The aboriginal men, however, came across to help us out of our difficulty, and soon there was a line of naked helpers transporting our supplies.

The men carried almost everything on their heads, even two hundred-pound bags of flour, for they seemed to have little power in their hands. Their help left us free to put up the tents, store the food, and nail boxes on the trees for cupboards. By the late afternoon the camp was shipshape and everything except a few bags of flour safely stacked under shelter.

By that time the aboriginal women had completed their daily food-gathering, and, with the men, were sitting in groups watching the activities of the white folk. It soon became evident that something about my wife was puzzling them beyond all else. Every time she moved

out of her tent, the women, giggling and excited, pointed to their heads, while the men touched the back of their own, and then waved their hands in her direction.

'It's certainly her hair,' said Lauri (it is long, and golden, and was worn in a coil at the back of her neck), 'but it can't be the colour that's attracting them. Mr. McDougall's hair is much brighter than hers.'

Ron Trudinger, the teacher, solved the problem.

'No,' he said. 'It's not the colour that's puzzling them, it's the style. She's using the head-dress of a man.'

Without knowing it, my wife had adopted a style of hair-dressing that, in an aboriginal society, is used only by the fully initiated men. They and they alone are allowed to wear their hair, chignon fashion, on the back of their heads, the women coiling theirs over the forehead. As the initiated men are the important people, their privileges are strictly guarded, and it was no small wonder that the infringement of the rights by a woman should have caused so much comment.

'What about taking down your hair?' asked the teacher. 'The natives want to see how long it is.'

My wife, after some little hesitation, did so. With a torrent of chatter, and cries of wonder, some sixty people left their nearby camp, crossed the sandy creek-bed in a body, and surrounded my wife; mothers with babies across their hips, men with spears and spear-throwers in their hands, and children everywhere. I knew little of their language at that time, but sufficient to hear the women speaking excitedly of 'long hair' and 'like the sunlight.'

The day following, Tjundaga, our half-caste guide and interpreter, came in with his string of camels. Alex McLeod was right when he described them as poor. They most certainly were. There was only one decent-looking beast in the string, and two, in particular, were so thin that it was a puzzle how they kept alive. I wondered

how such a string would stand up to the long and difficult journeys ahead of us.

Nibiana, his wife, was a young, happy-faced aboriginal woman, who, although she had been brought up and trained as a cook by the wife of a station owner, was far happier roaming from place to place with her husband. She appointed herself our kitchen assistant, and improved the camp by building a wind-break and a bush-shelter under which we could have our meals.

As many of the aborigines of the Pitjendadjara tribe, whose life, art and customs we wanted to learn about, were camping nearby, we planned to stay at Ernabella for a month to gather the information that would determine our future movements.

On a previous expedition I had found the most effective means of gaining that information was to give the men sheets of brown paper and coloured crayons, and to ask them to draw. With these materials they would illustrate, by primitive sketches, their tribal country and its legends. This would enable us to decide the route of the expedition and the native informants we would take with us.

One holiday, Ron Trudinger arranged to take us with him on a school picnic. There was much chatter and excitement round our camp that morning, for a respite from school is always a gala day for children, be they brown or white, especially as, on that occasion, many of the little folk were going for their first camel ride.

We had planned to start early, but that was not to be. Some of the kiddies had forgotten their issue of flour —no small wonder, when they knew just where to gather an abundance of native food; others had been sent to get the horse, which, judging from his antics, had a distinct objection to picnics; and the camels, if their moans and cries were an indication of their feelings, had similar ideas. So, what with rounding up the beasts,

hanging packages on the camels, and assembling the children, it was well into the middle of the morning before we moved off.

The camels were fully laden. On the leader was my wife, with one child before and another behind her, and everywhere they could be tied were slabs of raw meat, billycans and small bags of flour. Lauri's camel was groaning under a similar load, and the third was lined with kiddies, six of them. Those who could hung on to some part of the saddle; those who could not clung to their companions like limpets. How they stayed there was a puzzle, but they did, and enjoyed the experience immensely. The children who walked were not distressed, for they knew their turn to have a ride would come later.

It was midday before we reached the steep-sided Intjinbidi gorge, where a watercourse had cut its way through the main range.

Near a small rock-hole on one of the upper levels of the gorge the children lit a fire and cooked their dampers from the flour that was almost left behind, and grilled the meat that had decorated my wife's camel on the outward journey. The children took little care to see that the food was well cooked; the damper was largely dough, and the meat little more than scorched. But what matter, their teeth and digestion were more than equal to the task.

When the meal was finished the children started to play, for, after all, why else should one go to a picnic? The boys began the spear and disc game. Already some of them had made a number of short spears from a tecoma vine which was growing on the rocky walls of the gorge, while others had cut a disc of thick green bark, about the size of a dinner plate, from a nearby gum tree. The players then formed themselves into two groups, and took up positions about fifteen yards

apart on the floor of the gorge. As the disk was rolled backward and forward between them, each group in turn tried to spear the target as it passed.

The game provided not only enjoyment, but training, for the boys, for by it they acquired quickness of eye and accuracy of aim that would be so essential to them in later life, when they would be hunters and food-gatherers, and the target, not the rolling disk, but the quickly moving animals of the desert.

We made a late start for home. The children were tired, for, like all of their kind, they had not stopped the whole day long. To add to their discomfort an icy wind had started when darkness set in. We white folk walked to keep ourselves warm, leaving the horse and the camels free to carry the children.

CHAPTER 3

# *The Mountain-devil Ceremony*

Not long after our arrival the old men established a camp close to our own, and, at my request, started to make drawings on sheets of brown paper.

The sketches of the old men were a storehouse of knowledge, for they illustrated the legends of the tribe, the exploits of their mythical forebears, and the secret aspects of their life.

Every day Tjundaga and I attended the fireside of our aboriginal informants, collected the sheets of drawings they produced, drawings that illustrated, almost without exception, the legends of the creation of their country.

In the beginning, or the 'Dreaming Times,' as old Nantawana poetically described the creation period, there was no life upon the world; no creatures, no trees, no plants, not even a mountain, low hill or watercourse. The world was a huge plain, extending level and featureless on all sides as far as the eye could see. At some time, long ago, the *tjukurita* men came, giant, semi-human creatures, who seem to have thought and acted like human beings, but resembled, in appearance, various animals, birds, plants or insects. These *tjukurita* or ancestral men travelled extensively over the countryside, and, wherever they performed their everyday tasks, making fire, camping, digging for water, such as are carried out by the aborigines today, some natural feature rose out of the bare flat land.

Everything in the world, except the level earth, is the result of the activities and wanderings of those giant beings. The waterhole at Ayers Rock, where later we filled our canteens, was the place where huge snakes had camped; the gorge at Nirunya, Jabiaba's country, had been torn out in mythical times by Milbili, the

Lizard, in his pursuit of the woman Kutunga; and the immense domes at Katatjuta (Mt. Olga) were once the camps of the man-eating Pungalunga men. Those great creators of the lands of the aborigines were, at the same time, the forebears of the tribe. So that, in the aboriginal tribes of today there are Snake-men, Emu-men, Ant-men, and so on, all of whom believe they are directly descended from one or another of the *tjukurita* men of the long distant past.

Since everyone in the tribe claims descent from one or the other of those mythical beings, the *tjukurita* men, and each in turn lives in the land created by them, it naturally follows that each man, woman and child is closely linked with his surroundings, the ranges, the rocks, the trees and the watercourses. They are his, the work of his ancestors, and proud is he to show them to the appreciative visitor.

One day Jabiaba made a drawing that explained why many of the small lizards and birds have their present-day markings. At the time of creation, the Mountain-devil (a fearsome looking, beautifully coloured, but perfectly harmless lizard) invited the smaller birds and reptiles to a ceremony at Miniri, a low hill in the desert country south of the Mann Ranges.

The little creatures came from far and near, for it was even worse manners than it is now to refuse such an invitation. And so they came, the Bell-bird, the Spinifex-wren, the Willy-wagtail, the Bower-bird, the Ringneck parrot, and a host of larger and smaller reptiles. The Mountain-devil, who was the leader of the ceremony, instructed the visitors to pair off and decorate each other for the coming rituals. The Banded Sleepy-lizard and the Mountain-devil took special care over their decorations, for each had an important part to play.

Because of the late arrival of the people and the fact that introductions had taken longer than expected, the sun had set before their tasks were finished.

The Blue-wren had already been decorated by the Bell-bird and was so pleased with the result that he was anxious to make his friend as colourful as himself. It was, however, too dark for him to see properly, so he lit a clump of spinifex to provide light. Unfortunately a strong wind sprang up and caused the fire to spread rapidly over the countryside. It destroyed the trees, it blackened the hills, and practically surrounded the little creatures at Miniri. Many of them just escaped with their lives.

That disastrous fire spoiled the glossy-white plumage of all the birds. Most of the feathers of the Willy-wagtail were burnt black, and those of the Mud-lark were scorched in many places. The heat turned the Spinifex-wren a rusty red, and the smoke so dyed the breast of the Blue-wren that it retains its colour to the present day. The eyes of the Stumped-tailed Lizard smarted so badly that the tears ran down from the corners in streams. Any aborigine will show you the marks if you ask him.

The Banded Sleepy-lizard and the Mountain-devil escaped unhurt, and still wear their ceremonial colours. The Mountain-devil not only retained his markings, but also his dress of decorated sticks. Even now you can see them on his body as long spikes. And, should you hold him upright, the little chap will put his hands in front of his face, as if to shield it from the heat of the fire so carelessly lit by the Blue-wren.

That legend formed the basis for the first ceremony belonging to the boys. It was entirely their own. The older men did not take part, and the women were not allowed to go near.

One evening Pilala, a young man, whispered to me:

'*Tjitji inma* (boys' ceremony) tomorrow morning, early fella.'

That was good news, for, as yet, we had no knowledge of the ceremonial life of the younger boys; in fact, up till then we did not know that there was one.

Before sunrise we heard the sound of chanting behind a pile of rocks some distance away. There we found a number of boys painting each other. Pilala was in charge of the rituals, and represented the Mountain-devil, while the other boys, ranging from seven to thirteen years, were already being decorated by their companions. As in the legend, the boys stood in pairs, the Spinifex-wren and the Willy-wagtail, the Bell-bird and the Blue-wren, and large and small Stumped-tailed Lizards, and many others. One of the older boys, who impersonated the Banded Sleepy-lizard, painted the leader, the Mountain-devil, who, like the people in the myth, returned the compliment.

Each boy had been greased, then rubbed over with powdered red ochre from top to toe. On that base was drawn the design which indicated the bird or reptile that the boy represented. The brushes used were no more than a finger, or a piece of bark stripped from a nearby tree, and the pigments, red ochre, charcoal and white pipe-clay, ground to a powder on a flat stone and mixed with water.

When those preparations were completed, the boys lined up behind a corkwood tree ready for the dance, which portrayed how the visiting creatures approached the camp of the Mountain-devil in mythical times. To the chanting of Pilala and Niari, the boys danced with prancing footsteps toward the singers, their bodies bent forward at the hips, and each hand passing over the other, with a curious rotating motion. Every now and again they stopped, called out in a highly excited tone—

as did the ancestral creatures when they approached the camp of their host.

The leaders and the boys then formed into a compact group and paraded, first to the aboriginal women, then to my wife, who returned the compliment paid to her by a gift of dried fruit and sweets.

Pilala told us that the performance would be continued next morning, so before retiring we laid everything out in readiness for an early start.

About sunrise, Jabiaba sent to tell us that the ceremony was about to start. This time the boys were differently painted, and the dances concerned ancestor birds and lizards. In one of those, Niari danced and acted the part of a Bat ancestor who was trying to hide from a Lizard-man travelling to the Mountain-devil's ceremony.

Niari was almost blind, the result of some destructive eye disease introduced by our white civilization. His sight was too dim for him to be a successful hunter, the ambition of all aboriginal youths, nor could he even see to find food on the ground.

He danced the story of the little Bat-man, who had attempted to escape the Lizard people. The furtive movements of Niari, as he crept stealthily from tree to tree, his low crouching in the grass, or graceful bounds over the scattered rocks, had all the fervour, the abandon, and the unselfconsciousness of the true artist. For those few minutes he belonged to the dim, ghostly past; he was one of the strange inhabitants of long ago, not the half-blind, despised Niari of the present.

After that dramatic performance, pairs of younger boys impersonated, first, two ancestral women travelling, then a pair of Marsupial-men catching butterflies as they passed along. The youngsters danced in time to the music, with high prancing steps, pausing now and again to mime the actions of their ancestral forebears.

Then, while the chanting broke out afresh, the boys, some only seven years old, ran forward and danced a curious, shuffling step in front of the singers.

That evening the men and boys continued the ceremony.

The women took but little part in that programme, or, for that matter, at any time. They did not sit in the circle round the fire, but in scattered groups on the outskirts. Again they had but one dance, in which they shuffled their feet, with their hips held rigidly, and thrust forward, and arms swinging freely, their feet making parallel ridges in the sand as they moved along. Simple that dance undoubtedly was, but it was their own, and they gained much enjoyment from it.

The men, on the other hand, not only led the singing, but did the acting, portraying with amazing skill the whole range of human emotions, from the sheer mimicry of daily events to the exacting dances of the sacred ceremonials.

CHAPTER 4

# *The Ceremonial Life*

The ceremony of the Mountain-devil, and the stories belonging to it, give the boys a foretaste of the rich world of song and drama that awaits them. Throughout the whole of their childhood, both the boys and the girls are surrounded by all the love and affection that one could wish for them. They wander in little groups, playing in the creek beds, hunting for titbits of food, or resting beside their tiny fires, singing their childish songs.

Although the older boys know that many trials and painful ordeals await them, they are not unduly troubled, but, like all children, enjoy the present to the full, letting the future look after itself.

One evening, however, the happy care-free life of one of their number is completely shattered. Closely related women, his source of comfort in every childish trouble, suddenly attack him and, with blazing firesticks, drive him from the camp. By that ceremonial expulsion the lad is deprived of the affection and care of the women, and forced to live under the gruff, unresponsive old men. From then, until the ceremonies are complete, perhaps in a year or so, the youth is treated as an outcast. He always sleeps at some distance from the main camp; never goes near or calls out to the women; nor does he speak to the old men unless first addressed, and then his reply must not be above a whisper.

Eventually the day comes when he is pounced upon by the old men, and, to the accompaniment of the wailing of the women and the shouting and stamping of the already initiated men, he is led to the secret grounds.

During the initiation rituals, the men who stand in close relationship to him open the veins in their arms and allow the blood to pour over his body. The idea

behind this custom is that blood is *kuranita* (life essence), and the giving of ample supplies of blood will provide the initiate with the necessary health and vitality to grow to strong and virile manhood.

Initiation, in an aboriginal society, marks the passing from care-free youth to disciplined manhood; from irresponsibility to obligation; and from ignorance to enlightenment. Its rituals are designed to teach the youth, by primitive symbolism and strange ceremonies, the rules and philosophies of the tribe, and the prohibitions that accompany them. Nothing is neglected that will help to bring about those results; ordeals of pain, trials of courage, the air of mystery and concealment, all emphasizing the importance of that crisis. The youth, lying face downwards, hears, but does not see the rituals enacted at his side, except when the guardian, by the aid of the flickering firelight, allows him a glimpse of some awe-inspiring spectacle.

The first initiation ceremony is the youth's most important step toward manhood. At its completion he wears a distinctive head-dress, is given a special name that marks his social progress, and travels only with the old men, who act as both tutors and guardians. He must neither see nor be seen by the women; indeed he is, as his new name 'Wangarapa' indicates, 'a boy in hiding.' With the old men, he now makes long journeys to attend the ceremonies of other people, although he himself may be forbidden to see any but the least sacred of them.

By the time these wanderings are finished the lad is fully grown, and ready to pass through the final stages of initiation.

This is the badge of a fully tribalized man. At its completion he is allowed to marry, if his promised wife is old enough; he may sit in the tribal council, although he will have little power; and he can actively take part in some, but not all, of the rituals. It will be many years

before the newly created member can learn all the tribal secrets. Even Moanya, who was already showing grey hairs, could not answer some of my questions.

'I am not old enough,' he said; 'ask Jabiaba.'

The initiatory songs, regarded as being particularly sacred, are never mentioned in the presence of the youths or the women, nor sung within their hearing. They deal with the adventures of three ancestral heroes—Malu, the kangaroo; Kunjula, the euro (a hill kangaroo); and Tjulki, a little night owl.

One day I saw the acting of the myth of the Wild Turkey, the ancestral being who tried to steal fire from mankind.

Long, long ago, as they say in the European fairy tales, the aborigines of the Petermann Ranges owned a desert oak that burned continuously, yet was never consumed. It was the only fire in the world and much valued by its aboriginal owners. For, should their camp fire go out through storm or carelessness, they could visit the burning log and kindle their fires afresh.

In those days there lived a particularly unpleasant old Wild Turkey-man, Kipara, who, because he had a minor quarrel with the owners of the fire, planned to steal and dip it in the sea. Had he been successful, a dire calamity would have overtaken the world. No longer could the aborigines have warmed themselves during the cold winter nights, or lighted their way in the darkness. A cold, dreary world would have faced the human race had it not been for two Hawk-men, who, at the last moment, snatched the firestick from the vengeful old scoundrel.

The acting of the legend was divided into eight parts, each of which had a single chant as a basis. Four dealt with the legend of the Wild Turkey and the firestick, and the other four, supposedly composed by Kipara himself, described some of the experiences on his long jour-

ney. A circle of men chanted the songs, beating the ground with sticks to mark the rhythm, whilst others danced and acted the episodes of the drama.

The opening chant described how Kipara tried to attract the attention of some women by his clowning. The antics of the excited Kipara were realistically portrayed by Tjalerina. Calling out in a loud, hoarse voice, he danced towards the singers with a curious hopping motion, his hips held stiffly, and feet close together, barely leaving the ground. At the climax, near the circle of chanting men, his cries became louder and more hoarse, and his actions so violent that he lost his balance, fell over backwards, and lay on the ground with his feet in the air, still roaring loudly. The men explained to me that Kipara's living descendant, the wild turkey of today, still uses similar methods to attract the female bird during the mating season. He calls her with a deep, booming voice, and, when she approaches, becomes so agitated that often, like Kipara of old, he topples over.

Kipara's song for the blind Wood Pigeon formed the basis of the second act. One hot day, when the Wild Turkey was sitting in the shade of a mulga tree, his attention was attracted by a blind Wood Pigeon groping along the ground in search of water. The poor, famished creature was almost dead with thirst, for the spring on which it had lived had dried up during the hot weather.

*Iputulita, kapi, wiara, niula, kana, wanmai,*

softly chanted the men in rhythm with the helpless groping and plaintive cries of the perishing 'bird'. Slowly, inch by inch, it crept along, its face close to the ground and hands searching blindly from side to side, the very picture of helplessness and despair. Suddenly, as if by chance, the actor's hand fell into a hole (already dug and supposedly full of water). Instantly the tempo of the chanting quickened as the 'pigeon', with an expres-

sion of intense joy, splashed his face, and drank noisily and greedily from the 'waterhole'.

In the next stage of the drama, which was acted to another chant composed by the Wild Turkey-man, two brown actors hopped about the ground, angrily stabbing at each other with sharp sticks. At some time in his wanderings, Kipara had released two of his spirit replicas, or *kuran,* from his body—all ancestral people had that power—so that they could go hunting for him. He was surprised and somewhat annoyed when, instead of doing as he wished, the Chicks, as they were called, quarrelled violently and attacked each other. The old man, after he had composed a song about the incident, reabsorbed the spirits into his body and continued his journey.

In the fourth act Kipara, impersonated by Tjalerina, had succeeded in stealing the fire-stick, and was on the alert against a surprise attack by his enemies. The actor was the very personification of stealth, vigilance and pure physical grace, as he sneaked in and out among the mulga trees, every step in time with the music, searching for enemies on the ground, around him, and in the skies above.

Niari, the half-blind youth who had danced so well in the ceremony of the Mountain-devil, was the performer in the next act. He impersonated Wara, a small wallaby that had been disturbed by Kipara when having its morning meal of wild figs. The little creature, uncertain of Kipara, hopped to the crest of an adjacent ridge and watched him from the shelter of a low corkwood tree.

'Don't be afraid', called out Kipara, 'I'm not a man, I won't hurt you. Come over here and we'll dance an *inma* (ceremony) together.'

'I can't,' replied Wara, the Wallaby, 'I don't know any songs, nor even how to paint myself.'

'Don't let that trouble you,' said the Wild Turkey, 'I'll make up the song, and,' he continued, taking a piece of bark from a nearby tree and wetting it with blood, 'you can wear this for *inma walka* (ceremonial marks).'

So Niara, wearing the decorations laid down by Kipara so long ago, mimed the actions of the nervous little wallaby as he hopped realistically from the group of low rocks to the plain beneath, pausing occasionally to lick himself, as all wallabies have done from those long distant times till now.

When the next act opened Kipara, with his fire-stick hidden in a tall chignon, was creeping stealthily among the trees collecting wild tomatoes for his evening meal. Suddenly he clasped his head and fell to the ground in agony. According to the myth, Kipara did not dare to lay the fire-stick on the ground while he was collecting food, for fear that his enemies might find it. So he bound it in his head-dress for safe keeping. But a wind, lately sprung up, fanned the glowing embers into a flame, and burned his head severely. Kipara's living descendants still wear a dark crown where their ancestor was scorched.

In the finale, which followed almost immediately, the Wild Turkey-man was wandering aimlessly about with one fire-stick over his shoulder and another supposedly bound in his hair. Convinced by now that he had eluded his pursuers, Kipara was admiring his fire-stick and idly lighting the grass at his feet. In the low scrub, intent on the recapture of the stolen fire-stick, could be seen two Hawk-men creeping stealthily toward the old man. Kipara was unaware of his danger until, with a loud cry, the Hawk-men rushed in and tore the fire-stick from his head. The old villain died in agonies beside the circle of singers, for, according to the legend, his pursuers had torn out Kipara's brains when they wrenched the fire-stick away.

CHAPTER 5

# *The Medicine Man*

There was a young blind medicine man, Nemienya, in our camp, who was reputed to be both skilled and powerful. I was surprised that so young a man, particularly as he was afflicted with blindness, should be in the possession of secrets, which I had thought belonged to the aged. But I was mistaken. Any youth showing unusual personality, and more than ordinary interest in tribal lore and the doings of the medicine men, was looked upon by the elders as a possible future member of the medical profession. The youth, however, would be totally unaware of their interest, and, without knowing, would have to pass strange tests before the secrets of the medicine men were imparted to him.

Apparently Nemienya, the blind man, not only possessed the necessary qualifications, but had stood up to the tests, for already he had been initiated and trained in the mysteries and practices of a *nungari* by Wilu, his tribal father, himself a noted medicine man.

When Nemienya was sufficiently mature to be trusted with that secret knowledge, Wilu had taken his spirit, under the cover of night, to the distant land of the *nungari,* which lies far south of the Pitjendadjara country, to show him its many dark mysteries.

But before Wilu could make that journey, his spirit had to undergo a remarkable transformation. It left its human body by the fireside and changed, first into the shape of an eagle-hawk, then turned itself entirely inside out. This change placed the feathers on the inside of the body, made the wings into legs, and the legs into wings. It was only in this curiously inverted form that Wilu could take the spirit of Nemienya

from his sleeping body, and carry it to the summit of a high pillar of rock in that strange land of the medicine men, the *nungari.*

From that high place, the *kuran* (spirit) of Wilu pointed out and explained to Nemienya the wonders and secrets of that extraordinary world; the pool of blood, always kept covered with branches by the spirits of the *nungari;* the kurrajong tree, whose bright green leaves had been replaced by the feathers of desert birds; as well as many other strange sights of which I could learn but little.

Before dawn both Wilu and Nemienya returned to their empty bodies by the fireside, for it was only safe for their disembodied spirits to be abroad in the darkness.

The morning following that adventure, Wilu would have enquired casually of Nemienya:

'What did you dream last night?'

If Nemienya had no memory of his experience, or had dreamt of other things, the doctor would have asked no other questions, for the answers themselves would have shown that his pupil was not ready for fuller instruction.

The aborigines do not understand that disease and death take their rise from natural causes. They believe that these afflictions are the result of evil magic of some ancestral forebear or evil person, and can only be cured by the counter magic of the medicine man.

Several times we heard of the healing powers of Nemienya, and his control over the evil spirits, but did not come into personal contact with him until Moanya strained his back bringing in a heavy log of wood. Knowing that Moanya would have a strange story to tell, I asked him what was the cause of the pain in his back.

It seemed that this was not the first attack. Several years previously Moanya and his wife, Numidi, when living in their tribal country in the Mann Ranges, having dug out a large number of rabbits on a particularly hot day, went to sleep in the shade of a desert oak. Later, when they were preparing a fire to cook the rabbits, Moanya was seized with such violent pains in his back that he had a difficulty in reaching the main camp. That evening the pains became so severe that his agonized cries awakened the whole camp. Quickly Numidi and some of the men lit a fire, covered it with a thick layer of eucalyptus leaves, and laid the groaning man on the top. That primitive application of heat, after all one of the best cures for lumbago, soon eased the pain and the sufferer went to sleep.

The following day a medicine man was called in. After much enquiry and thought he decided that Wambina, a mythical man who had created that part of the country, had speared Moanya in the back with a *kulpidji* (sacred stick) because he had caught too many rabbits at one time. By dint of much magic, rubbing, and the sucking of the painful spot, the medicine man extracted most of the stick from Moanya's back, and, for the time being, the patient recovered. Moanya told us, however, he felt sure that some of the fragments of the *kulpidji* still remained, for they often troubled him. He intended to ask Nemienya, the blind medicine man, to take them out on the following day.

I waited until the operation was well under way before going across to see what was happening. Moanya was resting on his hands and knees in the sand, while Nemienya energetically squeezed and massaged the flesh and skin around the affected region. Every now and again the doctor extracted a fragment of the

offending stick, and, carrying it in his cupped hands, turned his back on the patient and allowed the splinter to 'fly' away. However, as all the splinters could not be extracted by massage, Nemienya sucked vigorously at the painful spot for some time before he finally extracted the last and largest of the missing fragments of the *kulpidji* (sacred stick).

Following the healing of Moanya, I often watched the medicine man at his craft. His methods were nearly always the same. He would massage the painful spot, taking up the flesh in handfuls, and then pretend to extract a stick or a piece of bark, always under the cover of one hand. Sometimes he would pass the stick, which was usually nothing more than a piece of bark or twig, to the admiring bystanders; at other times he would turn his back and allow it to 'fly' away.

CHAPTER 6

# *Arrangements for the Desert Journey*

We had, by now, spent almost a month at Ernabella, and were getting ready for the extended journey through the Central Aboriginal Reserves in company with a number of native informants.

The lands of the Pitjendadjara tribe are situated in and around the Mann Range, which lies astride the borders of South, Central and Western Australia. This range is a low, granitic chain, which, towards the west, first breaks down into isolated hills, and then, finally, is engulfed in the surrounding desert.

Our string was made up of dromedaries—ungainly one-humped beasts—which were especially suited for the long, waterless stages that stretched ahead of us. Tjundaga had already hardened them, that is, trained them to go without water for long periods, so we could travel them safely for five or more days in dry country, and much longer if there was an abundance of young green herbage. Nor would their food have to be carried, for camels can live, and actually fatten, on the wire-like leaves of mulga and the low-growing acacias. These fodder trees are common, in fact, on previous expeditions in those parts, I do not remember any night camp that did not have an abundance of food for the beasts.

The method of loading a pack camel is unusual. A double saddle, which fits over the hump, is held in place by two straps, one round the neck and another under the tail. These prevent the load from slipping backward, when going uphill, or forward on the downgrade. As there is no surcingle to keep the saddle in a central position, that is accomplished by arrang-

ing the load so that there is an equal weight on either side.

A camel is guided in a different manner from a horse. One end of a light line, usually made of whip-cord, is attached to a stud-like nose-peg, which projects through an artificial slit in the nostril, the other end to a length of rope which is tied to the next beast in front. In case of an accident, or if the creature is restive, the nose-line will break, and prevent the nostril of the camel from being injured. But if the camel is used for riding a pair of light lines, tied to the nose-peg, takes the place of the familiar reins and bridle. The riding saddles are of a different construction and much lighter than those used for the packs. They fit over the hump in the same manner, but are held down with a surcingle. They have two sections, one in front, and one held behind the hump. On the front section is piled the bedding, water bags, and small articles, while on the rear sits the rider, almost over the animal's tail, in a picturesque and not uncomfortable position.

The action of the camel is a series of short, gentle lunges, by no means unpleasant and, once one becomes accustomed to the movement, no more tiring than the action of a horse.

But to a beginner dismounting is apt to be a little frightening. Should a rider wish to leave his elevated position for a more stable environment, he calls the magic word 'Hooshta'. With no more ado the creature drops forward on its knees, with a jolt that threatens to project the rider into space. Just as that calamity seems about to happen, the action goes into reverse as the beast settles on its haunches, shuffles backwards and forwards for a few times, then comes to rest. Mounting is the same series of movements in the opposite order.

Within a few days my wife left for civilization, for one must have either previous knowledge or youth to endure the strain of the long desert journeys.

Then came the final rush. Our camp had to be dismantled and everything arranged for the loads. Essentials had to be sorted from non-essentials, safe places found for the scientific equipment, the cameras and medical supplies, and a hundred and one other things had to receive attention.

It was surprising how long it took to get the camel string under way on the last day. Just as we were ready, a load would have to be adjusted, Nibiana would go away to say good-bye to yet another of her friends, or one of the staff would be missing. Finally, late in the afternoon, we succeeded, and moved off accompanied by most of the aborigines and dogs in the camp. After several miles I had to send the natives back, for otherwise we would not have had sufficient food to last the journey, or water in the canteens to carry us over the dry stages.

CHAPTER 7

# *The Journey to Lyndavale*

Excepting for the first day in the Musgrave Ranges, the journey to Lyndavale was through low mulga scrub, which, even from the back of the camel, limited our view to within a few yards on either side of the track. As our surroundings varied but little from one part of the day to another, that journey was possibly the most monotonous of the whole of the expedition. Yet, in spite of that, I found much to interest me, for I had lived with the aborigines long enough to have learned that the surface of the ground has always a story to tell.

The homes of the desert insects were a succession of surprises. There is a spider—I wonder if it is known to the scientific world—which, as it digs its home, a vertical hole in the sandy soil, coats each load of earth brought to the surface with a light, silken web, and then deposits the load on the circumference of a circle about eight inches from the entrance. There is also an allied spider which places its little dumps of coated sand in a neat pile on one side of its nest.

I also saw many homes of the curious mulga ant, an insect which builds a mud wall, up to fourteen inches in diameter and five inches in height, round the mouth of its nest, and then thatches the wall with dead mulga leaves.

In the warm weather there is a tiny ant, not as large as a grain of sugar, which is the bane of all travellers, brown or white. The ants seem to know by some uncanny instinct when human beings are about, for hardly did we stop near one of their nests than a line of them formed up and came towards us.

They attack those parts of the body that are moist with perspiration, such as between the fingers, under the arms, and other uncomfortable places. Their bite is like the sting of a wasp, a most distressing insect, and responsible for a great amount of bad language. The aborigines, when they are in 'ant' country, keep the pests at bay by a ring of small fires, which appears to be the only efficient protection.

Several times I noticed deep holes under the trees, with a rough shelter on top. Those, old Tjalerina told me, were places where the natives, when journeying between the Musgrave Ranges and Lyndavale, had buried themselves during the heat of the day. He further explained that when aborigines are forced to travel in summer over long, dry stages, they do not set out on their journey until nightfall. Before leaving the last waterhole they drink as much as possible, then keep going until a little after sunrise. When the day starts to warm up, the aborigines dig a hole under a tree until they reach the cool sand. Then they put a rough shelter over the top, reduce their skin temperature by throwing sand over their bodies, bury themselves up to the neck, and remain covered until the cool of the evening allows them to continue their way.

The camel string was much slower than we expected. What with late starts, restive colts, and broken nose lines, it was almost five days before we plodded our weary way into the station at Lyndavale.

CHAPTER 8

# *Mt. Conner and the Ice Men*

We had been doubtful whether the soaks at Mt. Conner would yield enough water to carry us across the desert to Ayers Rock, and indeed it seemed, at least for the first two days, that we were right. Amarari soak, which we reached on the sunset of the first day, was practically dry.

Anneri soak, the next water, on inspection showed only a small puddle of water, so small indeed that Lauri and I decided that the shortage of water had ruined our chance of reaching Ayers Rock from the easterly direction. But Matinya, the new helper from Lyndavale, revived our sinking spirits by announcing that there was *kapi-bulka* (water large), and the soak only required cleaning out to give us all that we required. We left the native men to do the work, and moved on toward Mt. Conner, where we intended to camp for several days.

We reached the foot of the mountain and pitched our camp by the light of a brilliant sunset, our tents rosy-red and the cliffs above glowing as living coals against a sky the colour of a galah's breast.

I spent the next morning wandering by myself at the base of the mount, once a part of that lofty rampart now scattered on all sides.

I returned to camp with the beauty of the surroundings still strong in my mind, and called the natives to hear their stories about that picturesque locality. I will not say I was surprised—for one is never surprised about anything that happens in legendary history—but it did seem strange that the mountain, which had so impressed me with its beauty, should be associated, in aboriginal lore, with the most fearsome

of all their mythical beings, the Ninya or Ice-men. In appearance those ancestral beings differ but little from the living aborigines, except that, because of their extreme coldness, their bodies are perpetually white with hoar-frost, and their beards and eyebrows masses of tinkling icicles.

Although Mt. Conner was their camp in *tjukurita* (creation) times, they now live under two salt lakes, about fifteen miles north. The entrance to their present abode, which is on a low island covered with stunted mulga, leads to huge underground caverns, whose ice-covered walls are continuously swept by howling, wintry blasts; a frightful place, equalled only in mythical history by the dreaded Nifelheim of the ancient Nordic people.

The Ninya-men spend their summer months in that glacial atmosphere; but when the winter nights come they leave their icy home to make long journeys over the rocky ranges and the sand-hills. The piercing winds that accompany them are responsible for the cold of winter, while the ice and frost that fall from their chilly bodies not only freeze the water-holes, but lodge in the grass to cut the feet of the natives; for it is one of the aboriginal beliefs that the deep cracks that form across the soles of their feet, and cause so much suffering in the winter mornings, are made by the ice left behind in the grass by the Ninya-men.

But those unpleasant Ice-men (there are no Ice-women) have their uses. When the hot winds of summer sweep across the country, killing the birds and the animals, and making life unbearable for the aborigines, the women and girls assemble at the clay-pan, near Anneri soak, to perform a ceremony that has the power of coaxing the Ninya from their icy caverns. The mere presence of their frigid bodies above

the ground so reduces the air temperature that a cool breeze is created immediately.

The three great rock masses, Ayers Rock, Mt. Conner and Mt. Olga, are the most imposing and remarkable sights in Central Australia, and, of their kind, in the whole continent. They lie in an almost direct east-west line, and are so unlike in shape and structure that their origin constitutes one of the geological puzzles of that vast plain.

Mt. Conner is a flat-topped mass of quartzite, about two miles long and up to three-quarters of a mile wide, that towers about eight hundred feet above the plain. The base is a steep slope, covered with huge boulders, from which rises a vertical rocky face, some three hundred feet high, that surrounds the mount almost without a break.

Toward sunset Tjundaga and I went to Anneri soak to give the camels their last drink before setting out on the journey to Ayers Rock.

CHAPTER 9

# *The Journey to Ayers Rock*

Even though Moanya and Matinya had been called to bring in the camels at the first grey light of dawn, and everything had been arranged for an early start, it was a good two hours after sunrise before we moved off.

It seemed almost impossible to get the camel string away earlier. Tjundaga and Nibiana were both easy-going folk who had meandered their way through life, so that a day or two, much less an hour or two, meant nothing to them. We knew that they were trying to get away as soon as possible, and that, in their minds at least, to leave an old camp by nine-thirty on a cold winter's morning was something of an achievement.

The journey from Mt. Conner to Ayers Rock led us across sixty miles of arid, trackless desert of sand-dunes. These dunes, which are about a third of a mile apart and from twenty to fifty feet in height, stretch across the country in parallel series for sometimes hundreds of miles. As our route was due west, and the trend of the sand-hills approximately north-east/south-west, we had to cross most of the ridges at right angles.

Although, in general, the camel string kept on its steady way, there were always delays. Tjundaga and Nibiana were aboriginal in both thought and outlook, and their hunting instincts so strong that the mere sight of a fresh kangaroo or wild turkey track, a goanna hole, or a honey ant's nest was sufficient to turn the string from its rightful course, or stop it altogether. Nibiana, from her lofty perch on the seat of the camel,

would then direct the investigation of the track, or the digging-out of the nest.

Ayers Rock ranks among the wonders of Australia, if not of the world. Its sides rise so abruptly that a person, standing on level ground, can rest his hands on precipices a thousand feet high.

Other travellers have told of its imposing beauty, its colouring and immensity, but, although they have spoken truly, it would be well nigh impossible to convey, by the written word, any sense of its grandeur and majesty. We travelled all day with the Rock growing larger and larger; in fact, after our lunch camp, it seemed as if every sandhill must be the last. But it was nearing sunset before the camel-string reached the open plain which surrounds Ayers Rock, a plain swept clear by the local storms created by the rock mass itself.

CHAPTER 10

# *Ayers Rock and its Legends*

We spent the next week in an intensive study of the natural features of Ayers Rock, learning what we could, from its aboriginal inhabitants, about the meaning of the cave paintings and the legends belonging to the Rock.

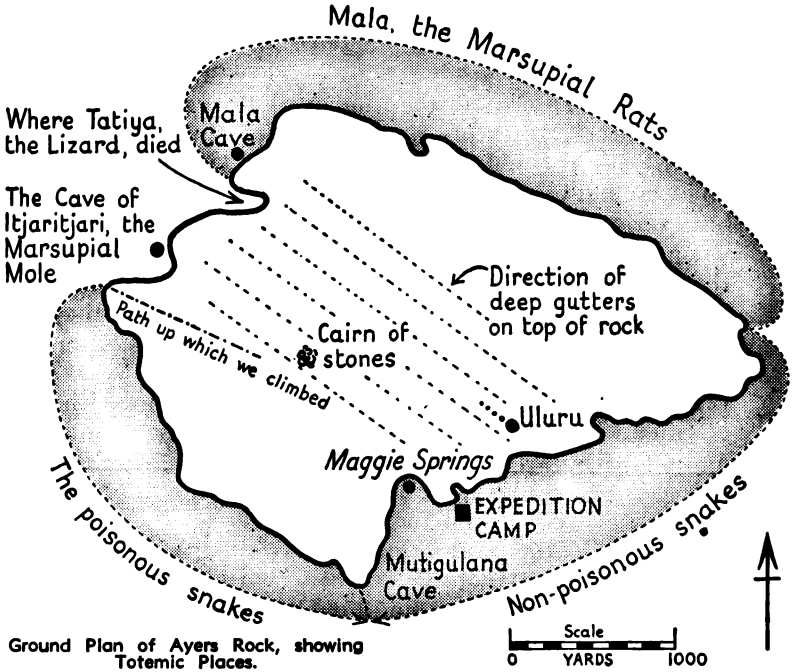
Early in our stay we walked round the Rock to get a general idea of its shape; but when I tried to draw a rough map, I was unable to remember the numerous deep bays and jutting headlands.

Our failure convinced us that it was necessary to make a survey before we could hope to draw a ground plan on which to plot the legendary places.

The final plan showed the Rock to be roughly kite-shaped, and approximately two miles across the major diameters. Its long, straight, northern face—the direction from which most travellers approach—has given rise to the belief that the Rock is narrow and somewhat oval in form; an understandable mistake, for only an experienced map-maker could visualize the ground plan without the assistance of either a survey or an aerial photograph.

As a natural feature the Rock is incomparable.

It is an enormous pebble, its sides so steep and so smooth that neither grass nor trees find a foothold, the only exception being an occasional fig-tree, whose long and twining roots somehow manage to hold on to the surface. To add still further to its singular appearance, the Rock is terra-cotta red, except at the head of some of the deep bays, where the surface has been stained black by the waterfalls which pour over the precipices after the summer storms.




Ground Plan of Ayers Rock, showing Totemic Places.

The major legend of Ayers Rock concerns a quarrel between the Windulka, Mulga Seed-men of Kikingura, on the western end of the Petermann Ranges, and the Kunia, Carpet Snakes and Mala, Marsupial Rats, of Ayers Rock.

At the time when the world was young, the Mulga Seed-men decided to initiate their youths, and, to make an occasion of it, asked the Bell-bird, Panpanpalana, to travel over the country and invite all the animals, birds and reptiles to attend.

So far as Ayers Rock is concerned, the story opens when the Bell-bird reached the home of the Carpet Snakes at Pukabuga, about eighty miles east of the Rock, and

delivered the invitation. The Carpet Snakes, good-natured and peaceful in those days, as now, accepted willingly and made ready for the journey. The Bell-bird then travelled to invite the Marsupial Rats which lived at Ayers Rock. But when he reached there, he found that they were in the midst of their own initiation ceremonies and were not anxious to make the journey. He was able, however, to persuade them to accept.

The Carpet Snakes, on their way to Kikingura, spent the first night at the Uluru water-hole (now a deep catchment on the summit of Ayers Rock). While they were hunting on the following morning they met a number of Sleepy Lizard-women. The Carpet Snakes promptly forgot all about their promise to attend the ceremonies of the Mulga Seed-men, married the women and settled down at the Mutiguluna water-hole. The Marsupial Rats also put off the day of leaving, for their ceremonies were by no means finished.

Meanwhile the Mulga Seed-men waited, and when, after several days, there was still no sign of their guests, they sent the Bell-bird to find out the cause of the delay. The messenger returned to Ayres Rock and reminded the Carpet Snakes and the Marsupial Rats of their promises, but they both refused point-blank to keep them, the Snakes saying that they had just married and had no desire to travel, and the Marsupial Rats declaring, somewhat rudely, that they were far too busy with their own ceremonies to be troubled about those of other people.

When the Bell-bird delivered the message, the Mulga Seed-men were so enraged over the discourtesy, that they asked their friends, the Poisonous Serpents, to destroy the Carpet Snakes, and instructed their own medicine men to prepare a punishment for the Marsupial Rats.

The Poisonous Serpents attacked the unsuspecting Carpet Snakes from two sides and quickly surrounded

the camp. A mighty conflict followed, in which many were killed on both sides.

While that battle was in progress, the medicine men of the Mulga Seed-people were busy making an evil being, called Kulpunya, with which to punish the Marsupial Rats. After they had laid out the skeletal frame—a mulga branch for a backbone, forked sticks for ears, women's hair along the back, the teeth of a small marsupial at one end and the tail of a bandicoot at the other—the medicine men spent the rest of the day chanting songs of magic to fill their creation with the spirit of evil. Then, from sunset to sunrise, they left it alone, for it was only during the hours of darkness that such a creature could develop.

The following morning the evil thing was already showing signs of life; hair was growing along its back, the teeth had increased in size, and the feet were sprouting.

On the day fixed for the attack, Kulpunya was fully developed. He was about the size of a dog, but had no hair on his body, except along the back and at the point of the tail.

The Mulga Seed-men then ordered Kulpunya to go to Ayers Rock and destroy the Marsupial Rats. When Kulpunya reached his destination everyone was having an afternoon sleep except Lorin, an old Kingfisher-woman, who had been expecting an attack from the Mulga Seed-men for some time. She had made her camp apart, so that she could get a better view of the country. But her precautions were of little avail, for, although she saw Kulpunya coming and called out loudly, she was unable to wake the people before he had attacked and killed some of them. The rest of the people, terrified by the sudden assault, left Ayers Rock and fled in confusion to the south-west.

CHAPTER 11

# *We Climb the Rock*

Uluru water, on the summit of Ayers Rock, where the Carpet Snakes made their first night camp, is an important spot in aboriginal mythology. The aborigines from the east, the west and the south had told me about the gigantic, many-coloured *wonambi* (mythical snake) which lives beneath its surface.

For years I had looked forward to visiting the waterhole, though I knew that to reach it meant a long, hazardous climb up the crest of a steep saddle on the south-western corner. But when I saw that bare, dangerous slope, leading upward into the sky, entirely devoid of grass or trees which would help in the ascent, my courage failed, and I persuaded myself that any information gained by a visit to Uluru would not be worth the risk and the labour involved.

However, the day that Moanya, Matinya and Tjundaga took me to the upper edge of the dry-weather camp of the Marsupial Mole, I realized that we were about a third of the way to the summit, and had already climbed some of the steepest grades. So I decided to make the complete ascent and get the matter of Uluru over, once and for all.

It was an arduous task; a yard or so of climbing, a rest to regain our breath, a few more yards, another rest, and so on until the danger point was passed. My native companions were most anxious for my safety, warning me about the loose fragments of the surface, and pointing out the best places to put my feet.

But our effort was in vain. Although Matinya had not been to the top of Ayers Rock before, he felt quite sure, from the description the old men had given him, that he could find Uluru. But when he saws the hundreds, if

not thousands, of circular pot-holes which had weathered out in the trough-like gutters, he became confused, and after much searching had to admit that he was beaten.

A few days previously, when Lauri and I were copying the designs in another cave, we had asked both Moanya and Matinya to make a painting on the cave wall, just to show us how it was done, but they objected on the ground that it would use too much red ochre. I did not press the matter, for red ochre is possibly the most expensive material in their culture. When we were at Mt. Conner, Moanya had given an aborigine a spear for a block of red ochre about the size of his fist, and it would have taken him two days of almost continuous work to make that spear. Red ochre is, in fact, the cosmetic of the aborigines. Both men and women delight in rubbing it over their bodies, for it not only rids the skin of its accumulated dust, but gives to it that attractive bronze-like appearance so desired by all aborigines.

But on the day when we were in the cave of the Marsupial Rats I had some red ochre with me (I had traded a red handkerchief with Nibiana for it), so we were able to see for the first time the complete technique of a cave painting. It could hardly have been simpler. Moanya, with the addition of water, ground the two colouring materials, red ochre and white pipe-clay, into a smooth paste on the surface of flat stones. Then, with his forefinger, he painted on the cave wall a design in red, representing a Fig Tree-ancestor from Jirinjirin, a place in the Musgrave Ranges. When the design was completed the artist, stripping some bark from a nearby tree, and using it as a brush, outlined the figure in white pipe-clay.

The finished painting showed a male figure, in which the usual shaped head was replaced by a wide circle with radiating lines projecting from the upper edge. This circle, the artist explained, was the *nuiti* (head-dress)

worn by the Fig Tree-men in 'Creation Times'. Moanya looked at me in surprise when I asked him where was the face, the nose, the eyes and the mouth, and said that there was only one place where they could be, in the middle of the *nuiti,* which, as I ought to know, entirely surrounds the face. He explained that he did not trouble to draw the face, because every blackfellow would know where it was. Though I was a white man, he did not expect that I would ask such a foolish question.

CHAPTER 12

# *We Return to Ernabella*

Before finally leaving Ayers Rock I decided to make another attempt to see Uluru.

Matinya and I set off on a miserably cold morning; the sky was clouded, and an icy wind raged round the base of the Rock. In spite of the blazing fire-stick which Matinya carried, we stopped several times to light a clump of spinifex so that Matinya could warm himself, for the poor fellow was almost frozen.

When we started to climb, Matinya armed himself with yet another blazing fire-stick, as thick as his arm, to lessen the effect of the cold. The wind had been troublesome enough at ground level, but when we were approaching one of the most difficult grades, about a third of the way to the top, the gale was terrific. The impact of its blast, and the steep slope, made the ascent particulary arduous. We would struggle up until exhausted, then lie flat on the rock, like a pair of lizards, to gain sufficient breath for another try. It was not so much the physical exertion of the climbing that fatigued us, as the terrific wind pressure. It seemed to buffet the very energy from our bodies. Matinya and I had to keep low on our hands and knees to prevent ourselves being over-balanced by the force of the wind.

We finally reached the top, and took a much-needed rest. Matinya collected dry branches from a lone corkwood tree and lit a fire to thaw himself out, for he must have been very cold. Once, however, we were on the summit, and amid the deep gutters, we did not feel the wind again.

Uluru was well worth the struggle. It is a remarkable oval cavity in the bottom of one of the deep trough-like gutters which pour their waters over the side of the

Rock. The water-hole is about thirty feet long, with almost perpendicular sides, except at the lower end. The position and the vertical banks prevent the sun from shining on its surface for more than a few hours a day, greatly reducing evaporation. Those factors probably account for the permanent nature of the water-hole, the natives claiming that even in the worst droughts Uluru never goes dry.

But of greater interest than its natural setting is the importance of Uluru in aboriginal mythology. For years I had known about the mighty struggles of the large snakes which, in 'Creation Times', had taken place on its banks.

But the mythology of Uluru is not limited to the mighty happenings of the past, for in deep underground caverns, beneath the calm surface of the water, there still lives a Wonambi, a giant, many-coloured mythical serpent, whose original home was in the sky.

Matinya had good cause to remember that Wonambi. When climbing Ayers Rock previously, with Lauri and Tjundaga, he became thirsty, and without taking due precautions, drank from Uluru. The next day Matinya was sick with a feverish cold, and everyone was convinced that he had been attacked by the Wonambi. Old Tjalerina said that the illness was entirly Matinya's own fault, for he should have known that a fire lit at the edge of the water-hole would have driven Wonambi back into his deep caverns.

On the day that we reached Uluru, Matinya, not going to be caught the second time, lit a smouldering fire near the water-hole as soon as we arrived; then he sat on the edge to watch for the movement of the water that would indicate when the snake had retreated to its underground home. So far as I could see, the water retained its mirror-like surface, but Matinya, satisfied that the

fire had done its work, drank heavily, and suffered no ill-effects.

We had noticed that the aborigines did not go back to their former sleeping places, but built new windbreaks some distance away. Lauri and I naturally went back to our old camp, and were about to light the fire when Tjundaga came across, quite concerned, and warned us against the danger of staying there. When Lauri asked the reason, the camel-man explained that every windbreak more than a few days old was occupied by a *mamu,* or night-dwelling spirit, and, unless we moved, the *mamu* in our old windbreak would attack us when we were asleep and make us ill.

Tjundaga's warning made clear to us why our aboriginal companions did not return to their old camps, and why those in permanent positions shift their windbreaks every few days. Although the fear of the *mamu* is the cause of that continual movement, it is possible that the belief grew out of necessity, and that some wise old man invented the legend to improve the camp health, or that the sickness associated with a filthy camp may have given rise to the belief of the *mamu* in the breakwind.

We left for Mt. Conner and Ernabella early the following morning.

I had already journeyed over a thousand miles on camels, and most of that over sandy, spinifex-covered deserts in Central Australia. Those journeys would have been most monotonous had it not been for the interesting things I saw from my lofty seat. From there I had a new view, a bird's-eye view of the spinifex and sand that passed beneath me.

Spinifex, or to give it its scientific name, *triodia,* covers both the sandy desert and rough hills. It grows, like the fairy mushroom rings, in circular clumps which grow outwards. One of the outer branches will bend

downward, take root, and start a fresh plant. That process goes on till one sometimes sees a complete ring of grass, with an area of clear ground in the centre. I was always on the look-out for a complete spinifex ring, though in all my journeys I saw but two. It was like searching for a four-leafed clover.

Every leaf of a spinifex bush is armed with a point, sharper than the finest needle, so sharp indeed that it could penetrate even my heavy clothing. That the natives would not walk on a bush consciously is an indication of its prickliness, for the sole of an aboriginal's foot is as tough as the tread of a motor tyre. Nor would the camel-string travel in a straight line, but would leisurely wind its way in and out among the spinifex bushes. Everyone and everything, except the tiny creatures which made it their home, had as little as possible to do with that unfriendly desert dweller.

As the spinifex passed under my feet, day after day, week after week, I began to recognize the tracks made by those small creatures. I learned that in each clump, separated from the next by a space of clean sand, there lived families of mice, lizards, small marsupials and insects; self-contained communities, each intent on its own affairs, and seldom, if ever, troubling the others.

One day, as I idly watched from the back of my camel, I was struck by the resemblance of these little homes in the spinifex to those in a human suburban area. Each had its own inmates, each was separate from the next, so I called them Spinifex Town.

On cold mornings I would sometimes walk to gain a closer knowledge of the goings-on of those little people of Spinifex Town. It was a pleasant pastime. There I was moving in a world apart, a world of tiny creatures. The tracks left in the fine sand, as yet undisturbed by the day's breezes, told me so much of their movements that, although I never saw the inhabitants of that desert com-

munity, I knew about their doings, their habits and their characteristics.

First there were the mice, our little domestic mice, which seldom went straight from one home to another. They would creep beside a bunch of spinifex, and then, with a quick rush, break across the open space to seek shelter in a neighbour's house. The tiny marsupial mouse was almost as wary, but he often ventured further afield. Occasionally I saw where one had made an exploratory journey into the larger spaces for a tit-bit, or to meet a friend.

As the day became warmer the lizards started to wander. They were the sleep-a-beds, and never rose before the dew was off the grass. The little ones were as shy as the mice, but much faster in their movements. They made swift journeys from one place to another, pausing now and again in the shadow of a stick or a clump of grass to watch for intruders. They were so small, and so light, that their tracks were barely visible. The sleepy-lizards and goannas, on the other hand, moved calmly from place to place, for who, except the eagle and man, could attack those giants of Spinifex Town?

The character of the birds, too, showed in their footmarks. The bombastic walk of the crow, that black robber of the Outback, was reflected in his swaggering tracks. The wild turkey (alas, now almost extinct where white men and foxes roam) pursued his way in a straight line, like the gentleman he is. There was one little bird—I never found out who he was—who was such a busy-body. I could trace where he rushed here, stopped, changed his mind, and then tore off somewhere else. He hardly ever reached his destination before something diverted his attention, sending him in another direction. He must have been a very busy bird, and a tired one before the end of the day.

The rabbit was everywhere. The characteristic groups of little circular footmarks (three and one) showed his wanderings. How that little animal, who belongs to the greener places of the world, gathers food and water in that desert country, where surface waters are non-existent, and rain-storms are rare, was always a puzzle.

Then there were the insects, spiders, and all sorts of creeping things, which left evidence of their movements on the sandy page. I imagine they were a stupid crowd, and they must often have fallen prey to some watchful bird.

CHAPTER 13

# *The Burial Ceremony*

When we returned to Ernabella we did little else but load the camels with fresh supplies, read and answer our letters, and chose the aborigines to accompany us on the westerly journey. We were sorry that some tribal business prevented old Tjalerina from coming with us, as both Lauri and I had grown fond of the old man. But as luck would have it, his place was taken by an even more delightful aborigine, named Jabiaba, who, as a born mimic and wit, was a favourite of everyone.

The whole of the aboriginal population of Ernabella left at the same time as ourselves to attend the final burial rituals of Namana, a man who had died some three months previously. As we were anxious to learn more about the ceremonies and beliefs of burial, and as Owellinna water, their destination, was on our track, we decided to accompany them.

Owellinna spring, our destination, is a stream of crystal clear water that flows from an opening in the hillside, ripples its way over a stony creek bottom, only to lose itself in a bed of sand a few miles from its source. Lauri and I pitched our tents nearby, for that was the first, and only time, that we heard the pleasant sound of running water during the whole of our desert journey. About a quarter of a mile distant, the aborigines had established a camp in readiness for the coming burial rituals.

The *kuran* of the newly-dead is greatly feared. Aborigines, unaware that death is the result of natural causes, believe that all such calamities are due to the evil magic of some enemy. Therefore, the spirit of the dead man, angry because it has been robbed of life,

takes every opportunity of avenging itself upon its living associates.

The whole pattern of the burial ceremonies is based on that fear of the spirit of the newly dead, and the precautions necessary to protect the living from its power. At the moment of death, all the immediate relatives flee from the camp to a distant locality, leaving their belongings behind them, to mislead the spirit of the dead man into thinking that they have only gone hunting, and will return. Those who bury the dead man make him warm and comfortable in his grave, so that his spirit will be less inclined to wander, while everyone mourns loud and long to please the spirit, and so reduce its enmity. The *kuran* of the dead man, longing for human companionship, sits on a small mound at the head of the grave, beside the dead fires in the deserted camp awaiting the return of its human friends, or roams the bush in search of them.

About three months after the death, two medicine men, accompanied by the relatives of the deceased, travel to the grave, capture the *kuran,* and place it in the body of a living person. This ritual serves a double purpose: it gives the spirit a new home, so that it will no longer be a danger to the community, and, by providing the host with an extra *kuran,* endows him with greater power and vitality. It is important, however, that the *kuran* should be given to someone of the same age; a child's to a child, a youth's to a youth, an adult's to an adult, and an old man's to an old man. If the *kuran* of a young man were placed in the body of one much older, the young spirit, with its greater vitality, would wear the older man out. On the other hand, if the spirit of an old man were placed in the body of a youth, the old *kuran* would drain so heavily on the younger man for sustenance that he would become listless, tired, and of little use at hunting or food-gathering.

So far as we could ascertain, the desert people have no idea of a future life. The apparent absence of that belief was not surprising, for the spirit of the dead man, being always placed in a living body of the same age, must become progressively older, until at old age the *kuran* is so weak and harmless that the medicine man will not even trouble to go to the grave to capture it. The frail, tiny *kuran* is allowed to wander round the bush until it is destroyed by some *mamu* or night-dwelling spirit.

The aborigines had assembled at Owellina to capture the *kuran,* and perform the final burial rites of the dead man, Namana. Lauri and I were allowed to accompany the party.

The next morning, as soon as we arrived at the main camp, some twenty men and women set off at a run to their destination, while the hundred or more who remained behind threw themselves on the ground and broke into loud and continuous lamentations.

We followed the travelling aborigines through a deep gorge, heavily overgrown with ti-tree, the sound of the mourning people growing fainter and fainter in the distance.

In the middle of the afternoon we tied the camels to some mulga trees, and followed the aborigines, who, with branches in their hands, were running toward the grave. Every now and again they stopped to call out, in a high-pitched voice, to let the *kuran* of Namana know that they were coming. After about two miles of running and calling, the party reached the camp where the man had died. Personal belongings were lying everywhere, thrown down by the aborigines in their headlong flight to escape the angry spirit of the newly-dead man. While the men and the women swept round the windbreaks and dead camp-fires to hunt the spirit of Namana back to his grave, the medicine men, who are the only

ones who can see the *kuran,* preceded the main party to capture the *kuran,* as it made its way to the head of the grave to await the arrival of its old friends and associates.

When the main party reached the grave, they stuffed branches into the crevices between the logs which covered the burial place, filling the spaces that remained with loose sand. The aborigines then took handfuls of the grave earth, smelt it, and rubbed it over their legs, for the odour made them strong, and the rubbing prevented their legs from getting tired on the long journeys. The party then set out toward our camels, first visiting their old camp to collect carrying dishes, grinding stones and other valuables they had left behind.

The next morning, when we started for home, the women who were carrying the children looked so tired that Lauri and I took their babies from them, one at a time, and carried them with us on the camels. The little mites, who knew only kindness in their short lives, stayed with us for hours, contented and unafraid.

By the middle of the afternoon we were within sight of the camp at Owellinna. From the back of the camel I could see the aborigines lying close together on the ground, crying softly. The returning party again collected branches, and, calling out in the same high-pitched voices they had used at the grave, walked slowly forward, and cast the branches on the mourning people.

Instantly pandemonium broke loose. The sounds of mourning rose to a high-pitched wail; the men sobbed heart-brokenly; twenty or thirty women, screaming loudly, were throwing themselves on the ground.

Yet, in contrast to that unhappy, sorrowing throng, were two rows of men, lying face downwards, their bodies rigid, their arms locked about each other, and hands tightly clenched. Then came the most curious and unexplainable part of the whole strange ceremony, something which suggested a possible belief in a future life:

the resurrection of the 'dead' man. The living men disentangled the stiff, rigid bodies, one by one, turning them face upwards, bending the trunks, unclenching the hands, vigorously rubbing the bodies and limbs, and roughly pulling the ears. Slowly each 'dead' man came to life; his body and limbs lost their rigidity, his hands relaxed, his eyes opened, until eventually he sat up and mourned with the rest. As the ceremony progressed, more and more 'dead' men were brought to life; the sounds of the mourning died down; the women throwing themselves on the ground became fewer and fewer until quiet reigned.

CHAPTER 14

# *The Journey to Oparinna*

The next day, with most of the aborigines from the burial ceremony, we reached Erliwunyawunya, a large water catchment, picturesquely situated between high, red cliffs. As the country had been without rain for months, the water was foul and green, for Erliwunyawunya is only a rock-hole, not a spring. However, as the party faced a long, dry stage, we had to take and be thankful for whatever water the Fates provided, good or bad. But with the water in such a foul state, every drop had to be boiled before Lauri and I could drink it, not so much to improve its unpleasant taste, as to remove all danger of disease. The aborigines do not seem to be affected by impure waters, though I have noticed that, whenever there is a sandy edge to the supply, such as at Erliwunyawunya, the natives do not drink from the main source, but from a hole dug in the sand alongside; a sound practice, as the water seeping in, being well filtered, is comparatively clean.

While the canteens were being refilled, we saw a hunting party come in, the men following each other in single file. The two leaders each carried a euro.

The euro, really a hill kangaroo, is not an easy animal to capture, its rusty-red colour so matches the rocks that it is difficult to see; its keen hearing, which detects the slightest sound, makes it hard to approach; and the speed with which it can hop from one rocky foot-hold to another makes it almost impossible for either man or dog to run it down. But the southern Musgrave Ranges, with their isolated hills, each separated from the others by grassy flats, are an excellent hunting ground for euros. The creatures, shunning the open plains where their colour makes them easy to see, always choose the shortest

route across the flats which separate one hill from the next, routes which, in the course of time, have often become well-defined tracks.

By the use of those tracks, the aborigines have developed a system of hunting, perfected by generations of experiment and practice. The method is simple. The spearmen, concealed behind trees or low bush shelters, are posted along the path chosen for the day's hunt, whilst the remainder of the men, who are the beaters, start at the distant end of one hill and, lighting the spinifex as they go, drive the game toward the spearmen. The euros travel ahead of the fire until they reach the nearest point to the next hill. Their only way of escape is along the path that crosses the intervening flat. There is apparent safety in front, and danger behind. The native waits until the euro is comparatively close before he launches his spear. It is a lucky beast that gets away. Even if the spear does not kill, it so retards the animal that it is easily captured.

The kangaroo of the plains can be speared from a hide in a similar manner, but the method of driving is different, for the kangaroo shuns the hills as much as the euro does the plains. Nevertheless, when the animals are travelling to and from their feeding grounds, they often follow well-defined pads. Several hunters take up their positions on one of these tracks, while the others quietly disturb the feeding kangaroos and shepherd them in the right direction. A spearman is able to stand in almost clear view to throw his weapon, for the kangaroo, when escaping from his enemies, fixes his attention on the path in front and the danger behind.

The best exhibition of hunting that we saw, however, was on the day that Tilbukuna stalked and killed a kangaroo single-handed. He had sighted the creature feeding on a plain, open except for a few corkwood and mulga trees. Signalling to us to keep quiet, Tilbukuna

made a wide circuit until he was down-wind. Then, taking advantage of every tree and shrub, he crept towards the unsuspecting animal until a hundred yards of open plain, free of cover, separated him from his quarry. The hunter waited until the animal put his head down to feed. Then, with spear poised on his spear-thrower, he stepped boldly into the open, and with no movement, save that of his legs, he walked slowly towards the kangaroo. As soon as the creature raised its head the hunter 'froze', and remained as immovable as the rocks on the hillside until the animal started its meal afresh. Slowly and patiently the stalk went on, the native moving up a few steps, pausing when the animal looked up, a few more steps, another pause, and so on, until less than a chain separated the hunter from the hunted.

When the animal put its head down, for what was to be its last mouthful of grass, Tilbunkuna stiffened, transferred his weight to his back foot, then, using the whole force of his body, launched his spear. The creature bounded away in fright and pain, for the spear had pierced his ribs. The chase was short and the end certain.

The aboriginal method of cooking the euro could scarcely be simpler. At Erliwunyawunya the natives dug a shallow trench in the ground, filled it with light branches, and set them on fire. While the fire was burning down the men prepared the animal for the oven, first by throwing it on the flames to scorch the fur from its body, then by cutting off the feet of the hind legs and the tail. The feet and the tail were later put at the bottom of the trench so that they would be better cooked. By the time the euro was ready for the oven, the fire had burned down. The embers were then raked out, the euro placed on its back in the trench and covered with hot sand and ashes. The carcass was left to cook for about an hour, certainly not long for a beast weighing fifty pounds.

On the day that we were at Erliwunyawunya I noticed that the men who carried the carcasses did not take part either in the cooking or the sharing out of the meat. At the time that did not seem particularly odd, for everyone had helped in the capturing of the euro. It was later, when Tilbukuna speared the kangaroo single-handed, that I first learned the principles of the food distribution system. He brought the kangaroo into the camp, laid it at the feet of old Jabiaba, sat down by the fire, and apparently took no further interest in the matter. Jabiaba cooked the beast, gave the least desirable parts of the body to Tilbukuna, reserved the dainties, such as the liver, kidneys and fat, for himself and portioned out the rest of the meat, even the best joints, to the other members of the group.

That method of division appeared to be always done; whether the game was large or small, or the people receiving the food men or women, the hunter neither cooked his catch nor had any say in the manner in which it was shared. In the long run, however, each person received an equal portion of the food, for the hunter of one day would be the cook on another.

There appears to be, however, a much wiser purpose behind the custom than the mere distribution of food. The government of the tribe is in the hands of the old men, and it is they who have the power to make decisions and ensure their enforcement. Were the skilled hunters, who are generally young, allowed to apportion their own catch, they could, by bartering their game for privileges and power, upset the authority of the old men, and so, the social balance of the tribe. But under aboriginal law, the successful hunter, young or old, can gain no advantage. His skill is of more value to the tribe than to himself; his only return is the joy of achievement and the praise of his fellows.

The food of the aborigines is varied, and is, from the standpoint of nutrition, well balanced. Their meats range from the larger creatures, kangaroos, emus, to wood grubs and even termites; their bread is made from the seeds of the various grasses, mulga, and other acacias; and at different seasons of the year wild fruits, such as plums, figs, peaches and desert tomatoes, as well as a number of green fleshy-leafed plants, and tree blossoms, add variety to their diet.

We had planned to travel direct from Erliwunyawunya to Piltadi, but had not sufficient water for the five days' dry stage, so we decided to follow a line of small springs which would lead us to Oparinna water, on the western end of the Musgrave Ranges, and from there to move on to Piltadi.

CHAPTER 15

# *The Rain-making Ceremony*

We expected the next objective, the Mann Ranges, to be the highlight of our research, for the whole area is rich in mythological stories. As we had already collected much information on the mythology of the Mann Ranges, and had persuaded a number of aborigines belonging to that country to accompany us, we felt well equipped to carry out an unusually good piece of work. But on the morning following our arrival at Oparinna, two aboriginal girls brought in the bad news that all except one of the waterholes in the Mann Ranges were dry, and that one, Piltadi, was so full of dead dogs and kangaroos that the girls had to clean it out before they could get water for their camels.

After a long talk, Lauri and I decided to continue the journey, but to reduce the string from twelve to five camels, leave all but two of our informants behind, and travel direct to Piltadi on a water ration limited to three pints a day until we were sure of the conditions ahead.

Then a group of old men, headed by Tilbukuna, came across to my tent and suggested in their quaint way that I could safely take the whole party with me, because they had decided to make rain to help me out of my difficulties.

The central point of the rain-making rituals was a disc of pearl shell. It was one of the many that pass along a remarkable trade route, which starts on the coast of north-western Australia and finishes on the shores of the Great Australian Bight, over two thousand miles distant. At their source the shells are full-sized, often engraved with curious designs; but as they move further south and take on the work of rain-making, the continual rubbing of their edges in the rain-making

rituals so reduces their size that, by the time they reach the south coast of Australia, they are little larger than florins.

The rain-making ceremony is based on the belief that the *ringili* (the pearl-shell) is filled with the *kuranita* (life essence) of water, and that the *kuranita,* when projected into the air, forms clouds which, under the stimulus provided by the chants and rituals, grow larger and larger, until rain falls.

During the ceremony, which took place out of sight of the women, a number of men chanted the songs whilst Tilbukuna performed the rituals. He first squirted a stream of chewed native tobacco on a flat stone, then rubbed the edge of the *ringili* across it, sucking the shell at intervals and spitting into the sky. Leaving the line of chanting men, Tilbukuna then walked across an open flat, lightly touching the tops of the mulga grass with the pearl-shell. Returning to the ceremonial ground, he put a mixture of blood and crushed grass on the flat stone, and continued, alternately, to rub the shell across the stone, or suck it and spit into the air. At the completion of the rituals, the pearl-shell was hung, by its suspension string, on a low mulga tree, so that it could swing freely.

The meaning of the various parts of the ceremony is of more than ordinary interest, and illustrates the method by which the aborigines believe they can control the forces of nature by sympathetic magic. The chewed tobacco smelt like rain, the sucking extracted the *kuranita* of rain, and the spitting projected it into the sky. Each droplet then became the nucleus of a cloud, which grew rapidly under the influence of the chants. As the creamy-whiteness of the mulga grass resembled young clouds, the touching of that grass with the *ringili* had the effect of making the embryo clouds in the sky, formed by the drops of water *kuranita,* to run together,

whilst the swinging of the pearl-shell on the end of its cord beckoned the rain to the place of the ceremony.

The next morning we set out for the Mann Ranges, five men and five camels, two of the men, at least, wondering what the future had in store.

Toward evening it seemed as if the magic of the rain-maker was starting to work, for there were many clouds, broken cumulus, with a background of cirrus. I watched them with pleasure, picturing a shape here and there, enjoying their grouping and the play of light and shade on their ever-changing patterns.

CHAPTER 16

# *Piltadi and the Rainbow-serpent*

The fates were on our side, for Piltadi still held two to three hundred gallons of black, putrid water, more than sufficient to give the camels a drink, while Moanya uncovered a soak, not known to the aboriginal girls, from which we were able to refill the canteens. So for the time being our troubles about water were over.

Piltadi is at the end of a long, narrow gorge, with steep, rocky sides, covered with large boulders, spinifex and desert trees; and a level floor, whose surface is broken occasionally by conical piles of rocks. In normal seasons, Piltadi is a series of large rock-holes, but at the time of our visit only the top one held water. That curious hole, about ten feet long and three wide, had sides so steep and smooth that anyone who had fallen in would have been unable to climb out without help.

The camels, of course, could not drink from such a waterhole, so that every drop had to be carried down in buckets and poured into a tarpaulin stretched over a bowl-shaped depression. I counted those buckets, and was surprised to find out that the five camels between them drank one hundred and twenty gallons; that is, each beast had inside of it twenty-four gallons, two hundred and forty pounds of water!

During our stay at Piltadi we learned from Moanya the story of its creation. Away back in the time when the world was young, two Snake brothers and their wives lived near Piltadi. Every day the women went out hunting, and every evening brought the game to the men, who seldom did anything but perform ceremonies. After a while, becoming annoyed at the men's laziness, the women decided they would eat all the food they caught, and leave the men to look after themselves. The

Snake-men were so angry that they made up their minds to punish the women. Many schemes were suggested, and much talking was done before the brothers agreed each to change himself into a Wonambi ( a giant mythical water serpent, which also had the power to travel both above and below the ground at will) and play a practical joke upon the women that would cause them a great deal of hard, useless labour.

Going to a marsupial rat hole, where the women had been digging, the brothers first imitated the tracks of a large snake by rubbing the back of a spear-thrower on the ground. Then they entered the hole, one of them, however, leaving out enough of his tail to attract the attention of the women.

Later, the younger sister, seeing the tracks of so large a snake, and then its tail, became most excited, but when she started to pull the creature from its burrow, its tail kept slipping from her grasp.

While having their evening meal the younger sister said to the elder:

'Today I almost caught a carpet snake as big as a Wonambi, but I couldn't pull it from its burrow, it was too strong for me.'

'I'll give you help tomorrow,' said the elder sister, 'and we'll catch it, however big it is'.

The next morning the women set off, digging-sticks in their hands, and wooden dishes on their heads. When they reached the burrow of the marsupial rat, they saw fresh tracks round its entrance (made by the Snake brothers). But though the women dug all day long, at times seeing their prey, they finished at sunset, hot and tired, without any results for their hard work. All the next day the sisters laboured, and though again their quarry was often in sight, they caught only one small carpet snake, which they cooked and ate for their evening meal. And so the women dug on, following the

Wonambi, which continued to push their way through the ground, just out of reach.

In their pursuit of that snake the two sisters dug a trench from Atjaratjara to Piltadi, now a water-course, some twenty miles long, visible evidence of those women's labours. Then the burrow started to go deeper, and the work became more arduous. The sisters followed many side branches of the main burrow, only to find them either empty or occupied by a small snake. And that was how the women made the present gorge of Piltadi, with its many creeks, and its conical piles of rock that clutter the valley floor.

At last the elder sister changed her methods, and dug a pit (now the largest rock-hole at Piltadi) ahead of the entrance to the burrow, and uncovered one of the Wonambi before he could get out of the way. His huge coils, turning round in the hole beneath the woman's feet, so alarmed her that she threw her digging-stick, and pierced the side of the creature. The other Wonambi left the burrow, chased and swallowed the younger woman, while the injured snake, although suffering great pain, caught, killed and ate the elder sister at the mouth of the present gorge.

That Wonambi is now a curiously-shaped bloodwood tree, with a dry limb standing out on one side, and the trunk covered with lumps. The dead limb is the digging stick, with which the snake was speared, the lumps on the trunk the body of the woman still showing through the skin of the snake.

The curious aboriginal beliefs, linking fire, water, the rainbow, and the Wonambi, are well illustrated in a legend told to me by old Tjalerina.

One day, when two Rat-men were out hunting, they came across what they thought was a carpet snake, but what was, in reality, a young Wonambi, which had left its home in a nearby water to look for food. The men

captured the serpent, and prepared to cook it. First they made a fire of mulga, but as soon as they threw the Wonambi on the coals, the *kuranita* or water essence in its body put out the fire. Thinking something was wrong, the men collected a large heap of the desert oak, which always makes a hot bed of coals, but again the same thing happened. Entirely puzzled, the men used the best wood they knew, that of the ironwood tree, but although the heat was so great that the hunters could hardly get near the fire, the moment the snake fell on the glowing coals they all went black. The men tried many woods, bloodwood, corkwood and various acacias, but with no better results. Finally they used samphire wood, a shrub whose leaves are soft, fleshy and particularly full of water. That fire kept its heat, the food was cooked, and the men had their fill.

But the snake was far too large for one meal, so, shouldering the remainder, the hunters set out for camp. Before many miles had passed they noticed that their legs were becoming stiff and painful, and by the time the camp was within sight, their limbs were so rigid that they could barely walk. On all sides of them were little snakes, some of the *kuran* of the Wonambi. The aborigines, unaware of the cause of their illness, were just able to struggle into camp before they became unconscious.

By the time the medicine men had been summoned, the hunters were as stiff and rigid as dead men. When the doctors saw the meat that had been brought in, and the small snakes everywhere, they knew at once the cause of the trouble. They killed the young snakes, burnt the remainder of the Wonambi (with samphire wood), and then attended to their patients. On opening the bodies the medicine men found the hunters were full of water and the water weed that grows on stagnant pools, which the sick men had absorbed from the flesh

of the Wonambi. The doctors cleaned out the water weed, magically healed the openings, then placed the hunters between two large fires to drive the water (perspiration) from their bodies. The patients became conscious, their limbs relaxed, and in a short time they were walking about the camp, sadder, but wiser men.

CHAPTER 17

# *The Legends of the Mann Ranges*

The first sounds we heard each morning were the breaking of sticks, the crackling of flames, and the low voices of our brown-skinned companions, as they stirred our dormant camp-fire into life. The task was a voluntary one, done from a natural courtesy and a desire to help, and continued throughout the whole of our stay. Whether we were in the desert or the hills, whether the day was wet or fine, the same friendly sounds always awakened us.

The dry weather camps of the aboriginal people are very simple. Each one consists of a crescent-shaped windbreak of boughs about a foot high, shallow depressions in the sandy soil in which the occupants sleep, and fires, little larger than a dinner plate, one on either side of each sleeper. Scientists are puzzled as to how, under such primitive conditions, the naked aborigines can keep warm enough to sleep, especially as the temperature is often many degrees below freezing. It is possible that the native possesses some physical mechanism to meet those conditions, though on still evenings, when the nights are coldest, the heat rising from their tiny fires would cover their camps like a blanket, and keep the sleepers warm. But on nights such as the last evening at Piltadi, when a cold wind raged up and down the narrow gorge, the aborigines must suffer considerably, for the heat from their fires would be quickly blown away.

That cold, bleak weather continued all the next day. The blustering wind and light showers that tore across the plain and rough hills took the heart out of everyone.

Lauri, Tjundaga and I tramped behind the camels to get some warmth in our nearly frozen bodies, and the

aborigines carried burning sticks the size of small camp-fires. The fire-stick is a primitive, and, I had thought, an inefficient means of heating, until I carried one myself. I was then surprised at the amount of comfort that could be gained from so simple a device, for the heat from the fire-stick kept my hands as well as my face and body warm. Also, I was surprised at the care and skill required to keep the stick alight. Until Jabiaba had taught me how to hold it, the direction the wind should blow on it, and the way to keep it burning freely by swinging it across my body, the fire-stick either went out or scorched my fingers. In fact, I called so often on Jabiaba for assistance that finally he lost patience.

'P'raps you cleva fella 'longa white man's things, Tjamu,' said the kindly old man, 'but you bin know nodin 'bout *waru* (fire).'

Probably the most interesting spots we visited were Kanbi, where the Emu and Wild Turkey quarrelled over their chicks, and Purtunya, where there is a stone, once the body of an initiate, the mere touch of which means death.

The legend of the Emu, Tjakara, and the Wild Turkey, Kipara, explains why the emu of the present day has many chicks, and the wild turkey but few. The story tells of a time when the two birds, each of which had large families, lived in the same camp. The Emu, however, was a jealous person, who wanted to be more important than her companions. So one day, returning from the hunt with only two chicks, she told the Wild Turkey that she had killed the remainder of her family because they were too much trouble. After some persuasion the Wild Turkey agreed to follow the example of her companion; but no sooner had she done so than the Emu displayed the whole of her brood, and mocked the then distressed mother for her foolishness. The revenge of the Wild Turkey usually ends in the Emu

being deprived of the power of air-borne flight, and condemned to roam the earth at the mercy of the dogs and men.

Only a short distance from Kanbi is a curious, clinker-like rock, showing just above the ground. That rock was once a part of the body of Tapinya, a young man who, when running along the face of a cliff to avoid being seen by the women, had fallen and was killed. The aborigines believe that the stone is full of the *kuranita* of disease and that to touch it means death. Even to break a twig from a nearby tree, or to dig in the ground within a quarter of a mile of that stone, is to expose oneself to considerable danger. The aborigines keep the stone covered with branches and leaves, for they believe that, if it were to melt in the hot weather, all the people in the world would be ill.

I know of only one aboriginal love story, and that is associated with a group of stars in the tail of Scorpio. It relates how there once lived a young boy and girl who were very much attached to each other. When the lad was almost fully grown, he was taken from the camp, and the companionship of the girl, to undergo initiation. That separation distressed the girl, especially as the time for the initiation drew near, for she knew, in a vague way, about the painful ordeals through which her lover would have to pass. So at the initiation, when the women were told to leave, the girl broke the strictest of all aboriginal laws and, under the cover of darkness, stayed behind to watch the ceremony she was forbidden to see. When it was over, an old man took the initiate to a separate camp, where, tired out, he soon fell asleep. But the youth himself could not rest, because of the pain of his newly inflicted wound.

The girl, greatly distressed over the suffering of the youth, and the thought of their long separation, decided to take him from the old man, and travel to some distant

country where they could live together in peace. Worming her way close to the camp, she attracted the boy's attention by making the low cry of an animal, then, with signs, persuaded him to come to her. But no sooner were the young couple together than the guardian woke to make up his fire. Knowing that death awaited them, for both had committed unpardonable offences, the girl put her arms round the boy, and 'flew' with him into the sky.

When he realized his charge was gone, the guardian called his younger brother, and together they searched the ground for tracks, which soon told them what had happened. Looking upward, they saw the runaways travelling rapidly along the Milky Way. The brothers attempted to climb into the sky in pursuit of the escaping lovers, but their feet kept slipping and thus created many of the stars in that part of the sky. Finally they succeeded and strode along the Milky Way with great steps (paired stars are now their footmarks). A boomerang, thrown by the younger brother, just missed the girl, but the throwing-stick of the elder struck the boy's head with such a blow that it knocked off his *pukati* (head-dress). Now they are all turned to stars, and shine in the tail of Scorpio, the two guardians, the initiate, and the foolish but faithful girl.

CHAPTER 18

# *The Culture of the Desert Aborigines*

Nothing whatever had altered at Oparinna. Our tents stood isolated on the black, dusty flood-plain, and Nibiana's camp, cluttered with camel saddles, boxes and gear, seemed to have as many aborigines sitting round it as it had when we left a month previously. Except a goanna skin which some hungry dog had eaten, nothing had been touched, not even the goods or the food in the tents. That was no surprise to me, because I knew from some years of experience how honest the native people were, although when first I learned of that honesty it came as a surprise.

On that occasion I was a member of an expedition to the eastern deserts of Western Australia, and was among aborigines who, up to that time, were practically untouched by a white civilization. In the early days of our stay we had made some attempts to guard our supplies against theft. But as time went on, and we became more and more interested in the people, we became less and less concerned about our goods, until toward the end no one troubled to look after the camp at all. There were open bags of flour, cases of dried fruit, boiled sweets, and tobacco lying in full view of the native people, yet, though we were absent from the camp for hours on end, so far as we knew nothing whatever was stolen.

I was aware that the aborigines stole from some white folk, and not from others, and had often wondered why, until some native men in the western Macdonnell Ranges told me about the ill-treatment they had received at the hands of a certain station owner. Knowing that the aborigines had speared some of that man's cattle, I said to them:

'Yes, I know he's been cruel to you, but why do you steal his cattle? You don't steal from the missionary or from myself.'

'That's different,' they explained. 'We spear that man's cattle because he beats us, and takes our women from us; but we don't steal from the missionary or yourself, because you don't do those things.'

Our investigations had shown us that not only the social qualities, but also the intelligence of the desert aborigines was of no mean order. There has been, and indeed still is, a mistaken belief that the intelligence of a society may be estimated by the number of tools it possesses; that is, by the simplicity, or otherwise, of its material culture. The Australian aboriginal has, in general, a remarkably limited culture; no permanent home, no metal tools, no pottery, no bow and arrow, no agriculture, and only the simplest of hunting equipment.

The fact that our companions, with their five simple tools—the men, a spear and spear-thrower; the women, carrying-dishes, grinding-stones and a digging-stick—are able to live in an arid desert, in which the white man dies unless he takes his food with him, is surely an indication of, at least, a normal level of intelligence. Actually the desert people, whose life is one of continuous movement, have learned what we have not: how to get along with the least amount of equipment. They are entirely mobile. Should a family decide to go on a journey, the man will pick up his hunting weapons, the woman put her carrying-dish on her head, take her digging-stick in her hand, and, whether absent for days, weeks or months, the family have all they need to gain a livelihood.

The spear-thrower of the desert people has several uses. As a spear-thrower, it is an extended arm by which the weapon can be thrown further; as a cutting tool, it serves a multitude of uses; as a dish, the hollow body is

used to contain food; and for fire-making the thin edge of the spear-thrower is rubbed across a split log until the heat from the friction lights the powdered wood-dust.

The spear is a simple shaft, about nine feet long, made from several lengths of tecoma vine, bound together with kangaroo sinews. There is a hardwood blade at one end, fitted with a wooden barb, and a shallow hole at the other to accommodate the peg of the spear-thrower.

The wooden dishes of the women, chopped with unflaked stones from a hollow bole on the trunk of a gum tree, need for their making three to four days of continuous labour. The dish, like the spear-thrower, has a wide range of uses: as a baby's cradle, as a food and water container, and as a hold-all, in which the grinding-stones and other small articles are carried when the women are on food-gathering journeys. Their digging-stick is a straight branch of mulga, sharpened to a chisel point in the fire; and their grinding-stones, a flat slab and a round boulder.

Although food-gathering is monotonous, and often arduous, everyone takes a part, for the women always travel together. The experiences of those food-gathering journeys form a never-failing source of conversation, and the almost exclusive subject in their drawings, as Lauri found out, for he had been concentrating on the art of the women.

CHAPTER 19

# *We Return Home*

As the camels plodded their way along the track that took us back to our own civilization, my mind was occupied with thoughts of the simple, courteous folk we were leaving behind: witty, humorous Jabiaba, quick-tongued Numidi, kindly Nibiana, and sterling, dependable men like Moanya, Tjundaga and Tjalerina.

It had been a remarkable experience to have been able to see, if only for a short time, and then but imperfectly, the working of one of the most primitive cultures of mankind, a culture with tools so simple that the gaining of a livelihood in the desert is a remarkable achievement, a culture with a code of laws so well balanced that the people are at peace with each other, and in harmony with their surroundings. Nor were the aborigines living crudely or brutishly, as many would have us believe, but following a way of life rich in thought, in cultural expressions and communal living.

Just as the links of the aborigines with their past are strong and enduring, so is their relationship and their control of the world round them. It is the aborigines, by their increase ceremonies, who cause the animals to reproduce, the trees to blossom and bear fruit, and the grasses to bring forth seed. Because they are responsible for the creation of life, the aborigines do not destroy it beyond their immediate requirements. They are too much within the orbit of nature to understand, much less to get pleasure from, useless killing. So that, although the brown men have lived in the desert country for unknown generations, nowhere, away from the settlement of white men, is there any evidence of destruction by human be-

ings; no hillsides stripped of trees, no flats turned into dust bowls, nor are the creatures killed out.

The relationship of the aborigines to each other is as well balanced as their relationship to their land. From that relationship has developed a fully co-operative society, based on a system of giving and receiving that reaches out to every aspect of life.

It was in their food sharing that we saw the co-operative system most clearly at work. No doubt the frequent shortages of food made some system of distribution a necessity; nevertheless, such a system could only work smoothly in a disciplined society, where the laws are fully accepted, and the spirit of fair play is always present.

It is a remarkable culture, the culture of those desert aborigines; simple, peaceful, co-operative and kindly; free from greediness, bitterness and strife that characterize the more modern civilizations.

But all those things have their price. Although the social conditions of the desert aborigines are almost Utopian in conception and operation, the physical conditions are strenuous, harsh and full of privation. The desert is a hard taskmaster, and life within its boundaries is a difficult life. Long, tiring journeys in the blazing heat of summer, or in the cold of winter, are looked upon as a matter of course; food and water are often scarce; and hunger is a part of the daily round. For those in their prime, the hardships are not excessive; it is upon the children and the aged that the burden falls most heavily. But those hardships are the common lot of the aborigines, the pattern of their existence, patiently endured. The desert people are a happy people, as devoid of comforts as they are of cares.

Toward the end of the second day we reached Ernabella. Mrs. Ward, with her consistent kindliness, invited Lauri and me to a meal and a bath. We sat round the

table for a while talking about our experiences, then returned to camp and to bed.

The strain of the long journey was over; the night was still, and the stars shone like diamonds through the leaves of the trees under which I was camped. Relaxed, at peace with the world, and enjoying the feeling of again being clean, I sank into one of the most refreshing sleeps I had had for a long time.

I awoke at dawn to hear a rooster crowing, then the whinny of a horse. Later came the other sounds of our civilization, the bleating of sheep and goats, someone pumping water, and the white folk moving about.

Those sounds were most pleasant to hear; they were a part of my cultural heritage; they belonged to the association of a lifetime. They were to me what the sight of glaciers and green valleys are to a homecoming Swiss, or the roar of London traffic is to a Cockney. They told me I had come home.

# LIST OF DIFFICULT WORDS

*Adjacent*: Close to.
*Ancestral*: Belonging to, or having come from, the people (ancestors) from whom one has descended.
*Arduous*: Requiring much effort.
*Bane*: That which causes harm.
*Bombastic*: Very boastful.
*Casually*: In a careless or indifferent manner.
*Ceremony, Ceremonial*: Important business carried out according to rules which have been laid down.
*Chignon*: A form of hairdressing in which the hair forms a mass or pad at the back of the head. (Pronounced *shin-ôn.*)
*Climax*: The highest or strongest point of a series.
*Community*: A number of people living together with the same way of life, as for instance in a village or city. Their way of living is said to be *Communal.*
*Cosmetic*: Any preparation used to improve the beauty of the skin.
*Crisis*: A turning point, especially where one's whole life will be changed by what happens.
*Culture*: Here means the stage of development reached by the aborigines.
*Dormant*: Lying inactive as in sleep.
*Embryo*: The earliest stage of a growing thing.
*Environment*: That which surrounds a person or thing; the conditions under which a person lives.
*Fervour*: Passion or zeal.
*Finale*: Closing act of a play.
*Forebear*: Ancestor; one from whom a person has descended.
*Furtive*: Trying to avoid being seen; acting like a thief.
*Gala day*: A day of pleasure and rejoicing.
*Geological*: Geology is the study of the rocks which make up the crust of the earth.
*Host*: Here means the person on which something lives, or from whom it draws its nourishment.
*Infringement*: A breaking of the law.
*Initiate*: One who is introduced into a society and is given for the first time the secrets of that society.
*Interpreter*: One who translates one language into another for the benefit of someone who knows only one of the languages.
*Intruder*: One who comes uninvited into a place.
*Legend*: A story believed by people to be historical because it has been handed down from previous generations, but of which there is no actual proof.
*Lore*: Knowledge or scholarship.
*Marsupial*: An animal which has a pouch in which to carry its young.

*Meander*: Wander aimlessly about (like a river).
*Mime*: Act with mimic gestures.
*Myth*: A story about ancient times, especially of gods or heroes; the people and events in such stories are said to be *mythical*. *Mythology* is the study of myths.
*Nucleus*: Central part of a thing around which the other parts are gathered.
*Nutrition*: Food; nourishment.
*Obligation*: The being bound to do one's duty.
*Pandemonium*: The hall of the demons. The word is here used to mean a disorderly uproar such as would be heard in such a place.
*Philosophy*: The ideas one holds about the nature of the universe.
*Pigment*: Colouring matter used in a paint or dye.
*Primitive*: Belonging to the earliest times.
*Prohibition*: An order forbidding some particular thing.
*Replica*: An exact copy.
*Reputed*: Generally believed or considered to be.
*Ritual*: A solemn ceremony carried out always in exactly the same way.
*Scorpio*: The constellation (star group) of the Scorpion.
*Stimulus*: That which rouses to action.
*Surcingle*: A harness band round a horse's body.
*Sustenance*: Nourishment, food.
*Symbolism*: Representing something by marks or signs. The Cross is the symbol of Christianity. Such signs are called *Symbolic*.
*Technique*: Way of doing some work of an artistic nature.
*Tempo*: Rapidity or style of movement.
*Visualize*: Call up a mental picture of.
*Utopian*: Utopia is an imaginary place where everything is perfect. *Utopian* is therefore being more nearly perfect than one is likely to find anything in this world.

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